

## **Education and the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago**

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Equality in Chicago Public Schools was rare in the 1960s. Education is something that everyone needs. The education that African Americans received in Chicago Public Schools was terrible. As a result, change had to occur; marches and boycotts had to happen to improve this crisis in the Chicago Public Schools.

Chicago Public Schools were very segregated. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court made a decision that separate education is unequal, and therefore illegal. Twelve years later, the Chicago Public School system was still segregated. This affected ninety percent of Chicago Public School children. Either the school was mostly black or mostly white; it was rare that one found both. For example, in 1961, Ogden School had an enrollment of sixty-five percent white and twelve percent black. Byrd School had ninety-eight percent black and two percent white. Consequently, segregation in schools led to inadequate education for blacks.

Conditions did not stop here. Chicago school districts were remapped to ensure that schools stayed segregated. In 1961, Wells High School was redistricted to exclude students from the Near North Side from enrollment there. Those in attendance were allowed to graduate. No further enrollment from District 7 was allowed, which meant the blacks were not allowed. African Americans had to go to school at Waller High, leaving Wells to just the whites. This shows that African Americans were forced into high schools, which led to overcrowding. By 1964, Waller High School was overcrowded.

Students were given the choice to attend Cooley High in the heart of the ghetto, or not to attend at all.

This was only one flaw in the Chicago Public School system that led to poor education for blacks. Many good teachers also left and unqualified teachers replaced them. The question is what was done about these things? A lot of letters of complaint were sent to the Superintendent of the Chicago Public schools, Dr. Benjamin C. Willis. These letters stated the problems that the schools had. Many parents and community members sent these letters to inform Dr. Willis about the needs of the schools. His response was that everything that the schools were supposed to have, they had been given. Common sense told a right thinking person that this could not be true if these many complaints were being sent and the whites were getting a better education.

The parents and community threatened a boycott against the school board. When the boycott occurred at Jenner School in 1964, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, radio stations, local community leaders, as well as Martin Luther King, Jr. were present. This showed that many supported this very important cause. How did the students get their education if the schools were being boycotted? This is where freedom schools came in. These were school sessions held in churches and other places to provide instruction to black school children while protests and boycotts occurred.

All of this protesting did not come without grief, especially for teachers. Teachers' jobs were at stake and were actually threatened if the protests did not stop. People were unmovable and unshakable in their fight for educational equality. Given the fact that schools are equal and not segregated anymore, the fight was not in vain. This was only one aspect of the hard work that went in to fighting for equality in schools. The

fight goes on because as good as schools are now, they could be a lot better. [From Chicago Urban League, National Urban League Leadership Development Project, Project Director: Miss Willene DeMond, "Anatomy of a Boycott, Edward Jenner School," 1964; Thomas Lee Philpott, *Black Metropolis; Encyclopedia of Chicago*, "Redlining;" and Bill Van Alstine, "CCCO To Demand Delay In School Budget Passage," *Chicago Defender* (Daily Edition) Dec. 6, 1966.]